
Giancarlo MARCHETTI, *La contingenza dei fatti e
l'oggettività dei valori*

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Matteo Santarelli



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Matteo Santarelli*

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Giancarlo Marchetti's *La contingenza dei fatti e l'oggettività dei valori* is a collection of nine essays concerning the fact–value debate. Among the authors, we find some of the most important protagonists of contemporary philosophy, including Donald Davidson and Hilary Putnam, to whom we probably owe the *renaissance* of the issue discussed in Marchetti's volume.

Undoubtedly, Putnam's 2002 book *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England 2002) has played a crucial role in bringing back philosophical attention to this problem, originated from the well-known Humean ban: "no ought from is". Even if Hume's point was far more nuanced, its reception through the medium of neopositivism gave birth to the mainstream postulate according to which facts and values should be drastically separated, in order to avoid both conceptual and ethical misunderstandings. However, from the early decades of the 20th century, an increasing number of authors have challenged this apparently hegemonic point of view, proposing an anti-dichotomic approach whose history and contemporary outcomes are thoroughly presented in *La contingenza dei fatti e l'oggettività dei valori*.

Starting from the historical side, a great credit is given to John Dewey's pivotal role in challenging the dichotomic *pensée unique*. Hilary Putnam (Chapter 2), Vivian Walsh (Chapter 3) and Ruth Anna Putnam (Chapter 6) show how Dewey's reflections about evaluation have opened a field of inquiry in which both the objectivity of values and the impossibility of conceiving facts outside a normative framework can be consistently stated. This perspective, which represents a serious alternative to logical positivist dichotomic approaches, claims to recognize the objective status of evaluations not from a humanistic, anti-scientific point of view, but rather from a naturalistic standpoint. Human conduct cannot deal with facts out of a normative framework, and at the same time cannot refer to values without taking facts into account. Specifically, Putnam's essay shows clearly the four theoretical stances by means of which Dewey escapes the double grip of cognitivist internalism (e.g. utilitarianism) and of non-cognitivist internalism (e.g. emotivism): the centrality of reflection in the constitution of values (42); the objective nature of values (53-54); the intersubjective nature of values (48-49), and finally the definition of the discussion about values as a particular instance of practical discussion (57). Being irreducible neither to unsophisticated scientism, nor to ultra-subjectivist forms of postmodernism, Dewey's point seems to offer an original contribution to the contemporary need for a philosophical "third way" between the two more commonly used instances of dogmatism.

* Università Roma Tre [matteosantarelli85@libero.it]

Even when this Deweyan heritage can't be directly tracked, we can often find some interesting concurrences. For instance, Taylor's distinction between initial conception of the good and considered conception of the good (Chapter 8), wherein the presence of reflection distinguishes the latter from the former, is logically analogous to Deweyan conceptual couples like praise/appraise, valuing/evaluating. And, in the same essay, we can read the following sentence, which seems to perfectly reflect Dewey's meliorism: "Moral conflict is often a mere way station on the path toward more encompassing normative community" (190-191). Also David Copp's naturalistic outline of a society-centered moral (Chapter 7) seems to reflect the philosophical approach to morality proposed by Mead and Dewey in the writings from their years in Chicago. Thus, either directly or indirectly, Marchetti's collection pinpoints classical pragmatism as a most fertile source of arguments in favor of an anti-dichotomic approach to the fact-value question.

Undoubtedly, the scope of *La contingenza dei fatti e l'oggettività dei valori* goes far beyond the domain of history of philosophy. In fact, the central issues of the volume are often dealt with in an analytical fashion. From this logical point of view, it is interesting to notice that the most powerful argument against the evaluation/description dichotomy may consist in the detailed presentation of the unbearable difficulties entailed by the position under discussion. Even if their arguments are formulated in a hypothetical form, both Barry Stroud and Donald Davidson (see Chapter 9 and Chapter 4, respectively) invite the reader to acknowledge the difficulties involved in denying the objective nature of valuations in a consistent way without rendering some crucial and irrevocable concepts like "intentional action" and "understanding" unintelligible. As Stroud argues, it is impossible to talk appropriately about intentional actions without referring to reasons to act; but "reasons" in turn presuppose evaluations. For instance, the reason why a man goes to work on a sunny Summer day instead of going to the beach is grounded on an evaluation: he evaluates that keeping his job is actually the most important thing to him. As long as it can be reasonably upheld, this evaluation is not a mere emotional expression. Therefore, reasons to act have both an evaluative and an objective nature. In an equally persuasive way, Davidson explains how impossible it is to conceive the act of understanding outside a normative framework, and how this common ground is the precondition, rather than the consequence of public discussion, no matter how conflicting it might be.

Besides the more theoretical and analytical discussions, the book contains several original insights concerning particular issues. Kenneth Taylor's essay in Chapter 8 shows how a relativistic approach may be perfectly consistent with an objective definition of values. In order to achieve this apparently counterintuitive theoretical result, Taylor argues, we must separate tolerant relativism from intolerant relativism. Differently from the former, the latter allows for the possibility of criticizing a different moral system, and at the same time it is consistent with the rejection of a transcendent ethical standpoint (195). Based on the distinction between the authority that entitles and the authority that binds, an intolerant relativist can morally reject values employed by a different culture (e.g. female genital mutilation), without parting with relativism. Also Sharyn Clough's essay (Chapter 5) is a bold challenge to many philosophical

stereotypes. Against banal interpretations of feminist epistemologies as instances of a mere destructive refusal of scientific enterprise in itself, Clough demonstrates that feminist evaluative points of view in science often prove to be more objective than their chauvinist predecessors, as long as they are able to produce more satisfying and reliable scientific results. For example, the advent of a feminist radical reshaping of the mainstream sociological conception of women, which constricted the domain of their needs and desires to matrimonial and parental relationships, has made possible an objective empirical improvement in scientific research on divorce (114). So therefore, the shift from dichotomic to anti-dichotomic approaches to the fact-value issue appears as a valuable source of new conceptual reconstructions and of some deep theoretical innovations.

To sum up, this volume is interesting reading for any scholar interested in philosophy and in natural and social sciences. Starting from Marchetti's essay in Chapter I – an admirable reconstruction of the history of the fact/value dichotomy from Hume to Putnam, which sheds light on often underrated authors like Charles L. Stevenson, and also provides a thorough bibliography of the general subject-matter –, both the novice and the expert reader may find an exhaustive exposition of the contemporary state of debate concerning the issue in question. Under this aspect, the scope of this collection seems to partly overlap with the purposes of other recent volumes – among them, I would like to mention the interesting books *Value-Free Science: Ideals and Illusions*, edited by Harold Kincaid, John Dupré, and Alison Wylie in 2007, and M. Krausz, *Relativism: a Contemporary Anthology* (2010). However, Marchetti's volume is not just a competently assembled overview, but rather an original and important work for a number of reasons.

Apart from its geo-political context – Marchetti's volume is the first anthology examining the fact/value debate in Italian – what really makes *La contingenza dei fatti e l'oggettività dei valori* a must-read and a very original contribution to contemporary philosophical debate is the above mentioned link which connects, either directly or indirectly, the main arguments displayed through the nine essays composing the book with the pragmatist heritage. This legacy is often neglected and underrated, but it has become a necessary benchmark in contemporary philosophical and scientific discussions. Even though both the “objectivity of values” and the “contingency of facts” are now endorsed by several scholars belonging to various schools of thought, pragmatism has played a crucial role in moving towards the dismissal of the fact/value dichotomy. This dismissal leads both to the acknowledgment of the objective nature of moral statements, evaluations, and discussions, and to the recognition of the necessary presence of values in the scientific enterprise. The two paths are beyond doubt covered in an original and up-to-date way by Marchetti's volume, which presents itself not as a simple *hommage* to pragmatism, but rather as a living proof of the vitality of the pragmatist intuitions and ideas.